SHORTENING THE TIME PEOPLE SPEND HOMELESS

GOAL: The shelter and transitional housing system in your community is organized to reduce or minimize the length of time people remain homeless, and the number of times they become homeless. Outcome measures will be key to this effort.

Ending homelessness requires an alignment of resources to reduce the duration of each spell of homelessness, and prevent recurrence. A "Housing First" approach is critical to successfully ending homelessness. Housing First involves addressing the immediate barriers to housing so that homeless people can move into permanent housing as quickly as possible. Service needs are addressed through home-based case management, which helps stabilize the family, ensure that they will have sufficient income to sustain their housing, and prevent a recurrence of homelessness. For such a system to be effective, the incentives embedded in the homeless assistance system have to reflect these outcomes. Examples of such incentives include:

- Shelters and other homeless services providers should have access to and incentive to use prevention resources to avert a homeless episode.

- Shelters and transitional housing providers should have incentives to move people out of homelessness and into stable permanent housing as quickly as possible. To the maximum extent possible, a homeless person's service needs should not delay his or her entry into permanent housing.

- Structures should be in place to meet the service needs of re-housed households.

- Homelessness providers should be held accountable for people they have served in the past and should be rewarded to the degree that their former clients continue to be stably housed.

- At the same time, homelessness providers should be encouraged to serve people who have the most barriers to permanent housing and are most likely to be homeless longest. Incentives for quick, sustained rehousing should not sanction "creaming."

- Outcome measures should track the number of people who become homeless, the average length of homeless episodes (not necessarily the average stay in a shelter), and the rate of recidivism.

- Homelessness programs should be discouraged from using time limits, sanctions, or other devices that may reduce shelter use but do not end homelessness.

Examples

Chicago Department of Human Services (Illinois) Chicago is undertaking an ambitious plan to transform its shelter and transitional housing system into one that moves people into housing as quickly as possible. For a description of the plan's approach to shortening homelessness systemwide, see http://www.endhomelessness.org/best/GettingHoused.htm

Community Shelter Board (Columbus, Ohio) The Community Shelter Board (CSB) coordinates the city's response to homelessness. CSB reports semi-annually on each shelter and homeless assistance program, using these outcome measures:

Measures for homeless assistance programs
- Households served
- Successful housing outcomes
- Recidivism

Measures for emergency shelters (CSB funds only a portion of total shelter budget)
- Pass shelter certification
- Decreasing maximum length of stay
- Average stay not increasing
- Improving housing outcomes
- Increasing rates of persons not returning to shelter

To see more information about CSB's approach, see http://www.csb.org.

Resource

Materials on the Housing First approach, prepared by the National Alliance to End Homelessness, are at: http://www.endhomelessness.org/networks/housingfirst/intro.htm